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Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015)

I. Introduction

1. The present report is the twenty-third submitted pursuant to paragraph 17 of Security Council resolution 2139 (2014), paragraph 10 of Council resolution 2165 (2014), paragraph 5 of Council resolution 2191 (2014) and paragraph 5 of Council resolution 2258 (2015), in which the Council requested the Secretary-General to report, every 30 days, on the implementation of the resolutions by all parties to the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic.

2. The information contained herein is based on the information available to United Nations agencies on the ground, from the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, other Syrian sources and open sources. Data from United Nations agencies on their humanitarian deliveries have been reported for the period from 1 to 31 December 2015. More recent data have been included, where available.

II. Major developments

A. Political/military

3. Widespread conflict and high levels of violence continued throughout the Syrian Arab Republic in December. Indiscriminate and disproportionate aerial bombings and ground attacks by Government forces and indiscriminate shelling by non-State armed opposition groups and designated terrorist groups continued to kill, injure and displace civilians. The conduct of hostilities by all parties continued to be characterized by a widespread disregard for the rules of international humanitarian law and the obligation of all parties to protect civilians.

4. In December, deaths of civilians were reported by different actors. The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the killing of 1,446 civilians, while the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic reported that 222 civilians had been killed and 585 injured. The United Nations received reports of the alleged use of barrel bombs by Government forces, reportedly resulting in the deaths of 76 individuals, including 12 children in December. The United Nations was not able to independently verify those numbers.

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5. Heavy fighting continued to be reported in Damascus and Rif Dimashq in December. Government forces carried out several offensives. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), between 4 and 16 December, some 72 civilians in Duma, including 19 children, were reportedly killed in air strikes and ground offensives. OHCHR also received reports of air strikes hitting the Souk al-Tijari market in Jisreen on 4 December, reportedly killing 26 civilians, including six children. On the same day, the main square in Kafr Batna was reportedly hit, killing 15 civilians, including four children. On 25 December, the leader of the Army of Islam, Zahran Alloush, and five other members of the group were killed in an air strike on Duma, which, although publicly claimed by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, was attributed to the Russian Federation by the Army of Islam.

6. On 22 and 23 December, Syrian Government forces reportedly attacked a rebel-held town south-west of Damascus, in Moadamiya, with artillery fire and helicopters dropping barrel bombs. Local activists, opposition groups and monitors accused the Government of using chemical weapons in the operation, alleging that five people, including one civilian, died of suffocation following a missile attack on 22 December. It was not possible to verify that claim.

7. Non-State armed opposition groups continued to launch mortars and shell Damascus city during the reporting period. According to sources on the ground, on 2 December, 3 civilians were reportedly killed and 26 others injured, including 14 students at the Al-Sham Higher Institute in the Rukn al-Din neighbourhood, which was hit by mortars. On the same day, a mortar struck the Civil Engineering College in the Baramkeh neighbourhood of Damascus city, injuring two students and a professor. According to reports by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, on 3 December, 14 mortars and rockets hit the capital, killing 3 persons and injuring 26 others. Later, on 8 December, 12 rockets and missiles hit a school, a hospital and sports facilities, injuring seven persons. On 12 and 13 December, 91 rockets and missiles hit mainly civilian areas, killing 15 persons and injuring 56 others. On 14 December, the Permanent Mission of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations in Geneva informed OHCHR that the "Beiruni" and "French" hospitals in Damascus had been hit on 8 December by rocket fire, killing one staff member and injuring another.

8. On 19 December, Lebanese militant and member of Hizbullah, Samir Kuntar, was killed by an explosion that destroyed a six-story residential building in Jaramana, south-east of Damascus. The explosion also reportedly killed eight others, including Hizbullah commanders, and injured several more. According to official Syrian sources, Samir Kuntar was killed by a "rocket attack". Hizbullah alleged that two Israeli jets had penetrated Syrian airspace to carry out the attack. The United Nations is not in a position to confirm or deny that assertion.

9. During the reporting period, intensive fighting continued in different parts of Aleppo governorate. Pro-Government ground forces, supported by Government and Russian air strikes, hit areas controlled by non-State armed opposition groups close to the Turkish-Syrian border, including several villages close to the Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam border crossings. In southern Aleppo, Government forces made advances, seizing the towns of Khan Touman, Karasna and surrounding areas from non-State armed opposition groups and the Nusrah Front on 20 December. Government forces also continued to advance in eastern rural Aleppo towards the

Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) strongholds of Deir Hafir and Bab. On 29 December, ISIL reportedly started to withdraw from Bab town and surrounding villages north-east of Aleppo. On 11 December, non-State armed opposition groups made advances against ISIL, in the northern countryside of Aleppo, along its remaining stretch of border with Turkey, and seized Hamzat village.

10. On 26 December, the newly established Arab-Kurdish coalition known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) made advances against ISIL, with support from the coalition forces led by the United States of America, capturing the Tishreen Dam in north-east rural Aleppo. Operations at the dam were suspended for several days. In Aleppo city, non-State armed opposition groups continued to shell civilian parts of Government-controlled areas. On 9 December, for example, at least 4 civilians were reportedly killed and more than 50 wounded when the Nile neighbourhood was shelled.

11. In Ladhaqiyah, in the north-western part of the Syrian Arab Republic, Government forces, with support from Russian air strikes, continued their offensive against non-State armed opposition groups. On 18 December, Government forces recaptured the Nuba hilltop, in Akrad Mountain, and on 28 December, it recaptured Burj al-Kassab in Rabia subdistrict.

12. In Homs governorate, fighting continued between Government forces and non-State armed opposition groups. On 4 December, 10 civilians, including three children, were killed when a rocket reportedly launched by Government forces hit a residential area in Talbiseh. On 29 December, Government forces recaptured Maheen town and Hwarin village and regained control of several hilltops and farms around Qaryatein. On 12 December, ISIL claimed responsibility for a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device in the Zahra neighbourhood of Homs city, killing at least 16 civilians and injuring 45 others. On 28 December, a car bomb, which was not claimed by any group, exploded in the same neighbourhood, reportedly killing some 30 civilians and injuring another 190 people.

13. In Hasakah governorate, SDF continued its offensive against ISIL in the southern part of the governorate, with support from the United States-led coalition forces and the Kurdish People's Protection Units, reportedly heavily shelling the town of Arishah on 14 December. Elsewhere in Hasakah, three tankers filled with explosives were reportedly detonated by ISIL on 10 December in Tel Tamer, killing 22 civilians. On 30 December, bombs were reportedly detonated by ISIL in two restaurants in the predominantly Christian neighbourhood of Westa in Qamishli town, killing at least 16 civilians and injuring 30 others.

14. In Dayr al-Zawr governorate, on 5 December, ISIL reportedly hit the Government-held neighbourhood of Joura in Dayr al-Zawr city with mortar rounds, killing four civilians and injuring several others. On 22 December, at least 9 students were reportedly killed and 20 others injured when mortars fired by ISIL struck a school in the Hrabish area of Dayr al-Zawr city. The following day, ISIL reportedly captured Jafra town and the Al-Sena'a district of Dayr al-Zawr city.

15. In Dar'a governorate, fighting intensified between Government forces and non-State armed opposition groups. Five civilians were allegedly killed by heavy artillery by Government forces on 3 December in Sanamain and six more were reportedly killed the following day. On 23 December, an air strike hit a residential area in the centre of Sheikh Miskine town, reportedly killing eight civilians,

including five children. Two civilians were reportedly killed two days later, when the Government launched an aerial offensive in the area.

16. The Russian Federation and the United States-led coalition forces continued operations against ISIL across the Syrian Arab Republic in December. OHCHR reported that, during a 24-hour period between15 and 16 December, Russian authorities confirmed that they had carried out 59 military sorties against 212 targets in the governorates of Aleppo, Hama, Hasakah, Homs, Idlib, Ladhaqiyah and Raqqah and, between 25 and 30 December, 286 military sorties in Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, Hasakah, Homs, Idlib, Ladhaqiyah and Raqqah. At the same time, the United States Central Command confirmed that it had conducted at least 161 strikes against ISIL targets in the governorates of Aleppo, Dayr al-Zawr, Hasakah and Raqqah in December.

17. OHCHR received a number of reports alleging that there had been civilian casualties as a result of air strikes. Reports of the origin of the air strikes, however, could not be adequately ascertained. For example, on 6 December, air strikes allegedly hit Qahtaniya village and Hettin Orchard village in rural Raqqah, allegedly killing at least 15 civilians and injuring at least 25 others. On 16 December, 21 civilians were reportedly killed in an air strike in Raqqah city, destroying several buildings, including a mosque. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Russian air strikes have killed more than 2,300 people and air strikes by the United States led-coalition have killed 299 people.

18. The final weeks of the reporting period also saw an increase in public expressions of concern by non-governmental organizations and monitors regarding the air campaign by the Russian Federation. On 20 December, Human Rights Watch released a report documenting the use of cluster munitions on at least 20 occasions since the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Russian Federation began their joint air campaign on 30 September. In the report, it is stated that such weapons are internationally banned and inherently indiscriminate. The Russian Federation has consistently and strongly rejected this reporting as biased and full of ungrounded claims and has denied the use of cluster munitions.

19. Civilian displacement continued throughout the Syrian Arab Republic in December, with over 76,000 people displaced from Aleppo, Dar'a, Idlib, Raqqah and Rif Dimashq governorates. In Aleppo, for example, clashes between the non-State armed opposition groups and Government forces displaced approximately 10,000 people from several areas in the southern part of the governorate, including from Khan Touman, to north of the governorate. In Idlib governorate, intensified air strikes in northern and western parts of rural Jisr Ash-Shugur displaced approximately 4,700 persons within the district. An additional 500 people fled to Ladhaqiyah governorate and 1,750 to Turkey. In December, some 17,000 displaced persons returned to Tamannah area in south-east Idlib governorate after being displaced to Ma'arat al-Numan since October 2015. In Dar'a governorate, following intense aerial bombardment, over 10,000 people were displaced from Sheikh Miskine to the villages of Nawa, Da'el, Hara, Jasim and other nearby areas.

20. Civilian infrastructure continued to be targeted during the reporting period. According to OHCHR sources, on 13 December, four schools were damaged in air strikes in Duma, killing four teachers and eight children. In Dayr al-Zawr, the Sabie al-Jamia primary school was hit in early December, killing 3 students and four staff members and injuring 17 students.

21. There were developments regarding several local agreements during the reporting period. In the Wa'r neighbourhood of Homs, following an agreement reached in late November 2015 between a local committee representing the residents and non-State armed opposition groups and the Government, 300 fighters and more than 500 family members, including almost 170 children under the age of 12, were evacuated to Idlib city on 9 December. As part of the agreement, three inter-agency convoys delivered humanitarian assistance to 75,000 people in need. In Rif Dimashq, on 22 December, Government forces intensified their ground and aerial offensives in Muadamiyat al-Sham, where a local agreement is in place, reportedly killing 5 persons and injuring 12 others. On 26 December, the Government closed the main road to Muadamiyat al-Sham, preventing the movement of all civilians to and from the city.

22. As part of the implementation of the so-called Four Towns ceasefire agreement covering Zabadani, Madaya, Fu'ah and Kafraya and surrounding areas, a United Nations team, with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the Lebanese Red Cross and the Humanitarian Relief Foundation, facilitated a humanitarian evacuation of injured persons and their accompanying family members, with critical support from the Governments of Turkey and Lebanon. On 28 December, 338 people from Fu'ah and Kafraya and 125 people from Zabadani and Madaya were evacuated through Turkey and Lebanon. In accordance with the terms of the agreement, humanitarian assistance was delivered to Fu'ah, Kafraya and Madaya on 11 January. Earlier on 20 December, six air strikes, reportedly attributed to the Russian Federation, hit a number of locations in Idlib city. The air strikes reportedly killed 95 civilians and injured 170 others. The Four Towns agreement included Idlib city among the towns that would be subject to a ceasefire.

23. In Dar'a governorate, an agreement was reached between the Nusrah Front and the Government on 7 December to allow Nusrah Front fighters to leave Dar'a for Idlib governorate. A total of 185 fighters were reportedly escorted by Government forces to Idlib governorate. In Wadi Barada, in Rif Dimashq, an agreement was reportedly reached between local leaders and the Government on 21 December on restoring the water supply to Damascus city in return for the Government opening up access to the city and allowing the entry of humanitarian and medical assistance; a halt to the shelling and bombardment of the area; and the release of detainees from Wadi Barada. Following the agreement, the Government opened the road to Wadi Barada on 3 January, and the local leaders have restored a partial water supply to Damascus, pending the compliance by the Government with the remaining provisions of the agreement.

24. On 18 December, following the third meeting of the International Syria Support Group, held in New York, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2254 (2015), in which it requested the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria to convene representatives of the Government and the opposition to engage in formal negotiations on a political transition process on an urgent basis, expressed support for a nationwide ceasefire to run in parallel, and requested the Secretary-General to report to the Council on additional options for confidence-building measures. Furthermore, on 22 December, the Council adopted resolution 2258 (2015) renewing the authorization of the United Nations and its implementing partners to continue cross-border operations through the crossings of Al-Ramtha, Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salam and Yarubiyah for a period of 12 months and renewing the mandate of the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism for the same period.

B. Human rights

25. The scale and severity of abuses and violations of international human rights and humanitarian law remained grave during the reporting period. OHCHR continued to receive allegations and to document cases of arbitrary detention, sexual and gender-based violence, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, and deaths while in custody in Government detention centres. OHCHR also received reports of non-State armed opposition groups running parallel "justice systems" in areas under their effective control, which are not in compliance with international human rights standards, where civilians and other protected persons were subject to abductions, cruel and degrading treatment, and executions without due process.

26. During the reporting period, OHCHR received reports on deteriorating conditions in the women's section of Adra Central Prison in Damascus, following unconfirmed reports that nearly 300 additional detainees had been brought to the section in November and December, leading to severe overcrowding of the facility. According to OHCHR, the situation was further exacerbated by a lack of available medical services.

27. In Hasakah governorate, on 9 December, ISIL reportedly released 25 Assyrians, including two children, from their custody. A total of 123 persons have been released since February 2015, with over 100 Assyrian civilians reportedly still being held by ISIL.

28. In Qahtaniya village, in Raqqah governorate, on 4 December, ISIL fighters reportedly beheaded a civilian accused of spying. On 8 December, ISIL fighters reportedly executed three people in Tabqa town who had been accused of mocking ISIL. The following day, ISIL abducted a Christian civilian in Tabqa for allegedly not paying taxes.

29. On 3 December, ISIL released a video purportedly showing the execution of six residents of Dayr al-Zawr city in Rahba castle, near Mayadeen, who were accused of collaborating with the Government. The video appears to show children under 15 years of age carrying out the executions. On the same day, ISIL reportedly executed a woman in Albo Kamal city in Dayr al-Zawr governorate, who was accused of blasphemy.

30. According to OHCHR sources, on 3 December, the Kurdish People's Protection Units closed roads leading to Hasakah city, preventing displaced Arab civilians from entering the city, and arresting many of them for allegedly being linked to ISIL. On the same day, Kurdish People's Protection Unit fighters allegedly set fire to houses in the predominantly Arab villages of Mabrouka, Abo el-Shakhat, Raj'an and Raj'iya in Hasakah governorate, reportedly accusing the inhabitants of having links to ISIL.

31. On 14 December, Kurdish People's Protection Unit fighters reportedly forcibly conscripted a male child in rural Qamishli.

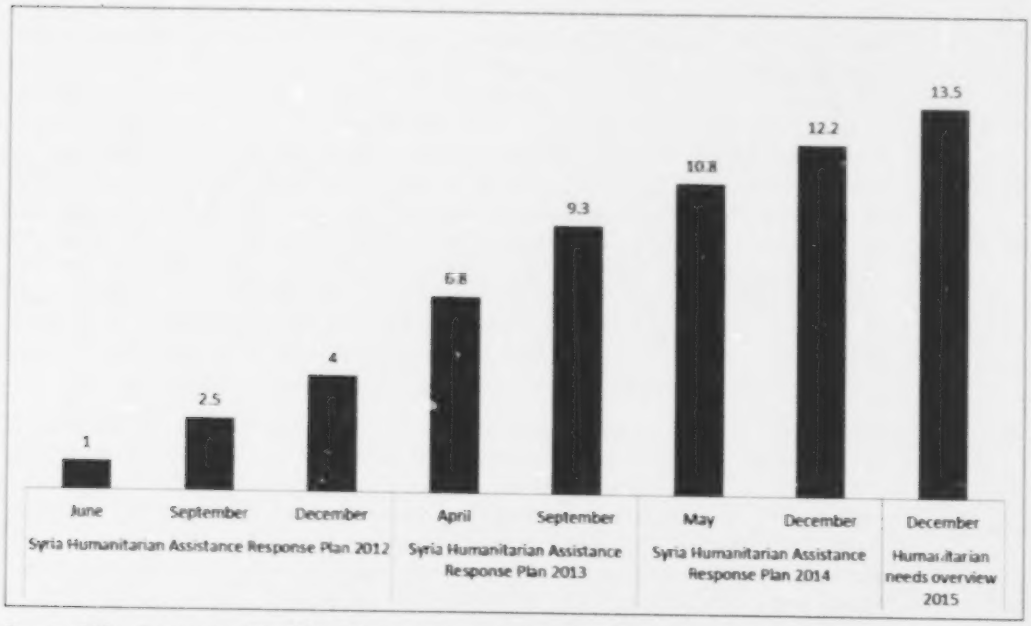
C. Humanitarian response

32. The humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic continued to deteriorate in 2015. The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance increased from 12.2 million in 2014 to 13.5 million, representing an 11 per cent

increase in the humanitarian caseload. In 2015, United Nations agencies assisted millions of people every month with life-saving assistance. United Nations agencies, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) more than doubled the number of people assisted every month in the second half of the year, compared with the first half. The number of people receiving food assistance remained largely constant throughout 2015, with the World Food Programme (WFP) targeting 4.2 million people a month. The World Health Organization (WHO) delivered, on average, 1.3 million medical treatments every month to people in need. In 2015, the United Nations and its partners requested a total of $7.4 billion for the Humanitarian Response Plan and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan. A total of $3.8 billion, or 53 per cent, was received. In 2016, the two appeals requested $7.7 billion for the response efforts.

People in need

(in millions)



Source: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat.

33. In December, United Nations humanitarian agencies and partners continued to reach millions of people in need, through all modalities, from within the Syrian Arab Republic and across borders, pursuant to resolutions 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015). WFP delivered food assistance to 3.6 million people. WHO distributed medicines and supplies for nearly 780,000 treatments and over 50,000 trauma cases. UNICEF reached 3.9 million people with multisectoral support. UNHCR reached 470,000 people with core relief items. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) partners delivered reproductive health-care services and services relating to gender-based violence to 18,000 people. FAO reached 625,000 people with food and agricultural support. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) delivered basic relief items for 151,000 people. The United Nations Relief and

Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) provided support to more than 280,000 Palestine refugees. Non-governmental organizations also continued to deliver assistance to people, in line with previous months. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic continued to provide basic services to areas under its control as well as to many areas beyond its control.

34. Cross-border deliveries continued during the reporting period. As at 31 December, the United Nations and its implementing partners had sent 240 shipments — 162 from Turkey and 78 from Jordan — to the Syrian Arab Republic, under the terms of resolutions 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015). The shipments included food assistance for over 2.5 million people, non-food items for 1.8 million people, water and sanitation supplies for 2.2 million people,[1] and medical supplies sufficient for 4.9 million treatments in six governorates. In line with resolutions 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and 2258 (2015), the United Nations notified the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic in advance of each shipment, including the details of its content, its destination and the number of beneficiaries.

35. The United Nations Monitoring Mechanism continued its operations in Jordan and Turkey. In December, it monitored 17 United Nations humanitarian shipments consisting of 476 trucks, confirming the humanitarian nature of each, and notifying the Syrian authorities after each shipment. The Monitoring Mechanism continued to benefit from excellent cooperation with the Governments of Jordan and Turkey. Three inter-agency convoys brought humanitarian assistance to 75,000 people in Wa'r, in Homs city, on 5 and 12 December and 11 January. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic did not permit surgical supplies to be included in the first convoy on 5 December, depriving some 24,480 beneficiaries of assistance. On 11 and 14 January, under the Four Towns agreement, an inter-agency convoy delivered assistance, including food, medical items and blankets, for 40,000 people in Madaya, in Rif Dimashq, and 20,000 people in Fu'ah and Kafraya, in Idlib governorate. On 14 January, WHO received permission for a mobile clinic to enter Madaya to start treating some of the reported cases of severe malnutrition.

36. United Nations agencies undertook other cross-line deliveries in December. For example, through local partners, WHO provided nearly 350,000 treatments across conflict lines, including in Aleppo and Homs governorates. UNICEF and its partners delivered assistance to Moadamiyet al-Sham, in Rif Dimashq, including water and sanitation, health and nutrition supplies, benefiting 11,000 people. WFP and its local partners delivered food to 2,000 people in Akash and Salba, in rural Hama, and 5,000 people in Tiba, in Rif Dimashq. UNHCR reached the Hol area of Hasakah governorate with relief items for 3,500 people. FAO provided veterinary supplies for the livestock of 18,000 people in Raqqa governorate.

Humanitarian access

37. The delivery of humanitarian assistance to many of the 13.5 million people in need of assistance in the Syrian Arab Republic remained extremely challenging in many areas owing to active conflict, insecurity and deliberate restrictions by the parties, including burdensome administrative procedures. In 2015, the United Nations and its partners reached less than a third of the hard-to-reach locations on average per month. In all sectors except for health, significantly fewer people in

[1] The increase includes deliveries of sodium hypochlorite to treat water systems, with a potential to reach an estimated 800,000 people in the catchment areas.

hard-to-reach areas were reached with assistance in the second half of 2015, compared with the first half of the year.

38. Access to the 4.5 million people living in hard-to-reach locations remained of critical concern. Since the beginning of 2015, out of a total of 113 requests submitted to the Government for inter-agency convoys, 13 have been approved and completed through 25 inter-agency convoys reaching 620,500 people with assistance; 15 have been approved, in principle, but have not yet proceeded owing to lack of final approval by security forces, insecurity and lack of agreement on safe passage, or are currently under preparation; 3 have been suspended owing to security conditions; 80 were unanswered within a three-month period; and 2 have been resubmitted and are pending approval. Compared with previous years, there was a downward trend in approvals in 2015.

39. In December, United Nations agencies and partners reached 49 of the 147 hard-to-reach locations (33 per cent). They reached 45 locations with food assistance for over 240,000 people, 17 locations with health support for over 386,000 medical treatments, 11 locations with water, sanitation and hygiene assistance for 370,000 people and 6 locations with relief items for 63,000 people. Over half of the people in hard-to-reach areas are in ISIL-controlled areas, to which the United Nations was not able to deliver assistance in December, except for FAO, which, through local partners, was able to deliver wheat and barley seeds to 5,400 people in ISIL-controlled areas in Hasakah governorate.

40. Active conflict in several governorates hindered the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance as well as people's access to essential services. For example, in northern rural Hama, insecurity prevented the delivery of food assistance to Kafr Zeita and Kafr Nabudah subdistricts, which was redirected to cover the needs of 10,000 people who had been displaced to Idlib governorate.

41. Deliberate interference and restrictions by the parties also continued to prevent humanitarian delivery. WFP continued to be unable to reach people in need in ISIL-controlled areas of the country, given that all deliveries have been suspended owing to the inability to work independently and to monitor activities. This affects some 720,000 people in almost all of Dayr al-Zawr and Raqqah governorates, parts of northern rural Aleppo, east rural Homs and pockets of southern rural Hasakah and north-western rural Hama.

42. The delivery of humanitarian supplies through the Nusaybin/Qamishli crossing resumed in December after the crossing had been temporarily closed in October owing to security concerns. Since 12 December, WFP has resumed regular operations through the crossing and has delivered all planned assistance to over 240,000 people. UNICEF delivered health, water and sanitation and education supplies for up to 700,000 people.

43. All UNRWA operations in Yarmouk remained suspended in December. The most recent UNRWA mission to Yarmouk was conducted on 28 March 2015. UNRWA was not permitted to conduct any missions to Yalda, Babila and Bayt Saham in December; other humanitarian organizations, however, have reportedly been allowed to deliver assistance to those areas. A limited range of commercial goods continues to enter Yalda, Babila and Bayt Saham areas on a daily basis.

44. The administrative procedures currently in place continued to delay or limit the delivery of assistance by United Nations agencies and their partners. In

mid-November, revisions to food import regulations requiring products to be notarized at Syrian embassies in the countries of product origin resulted in significant delays in the December deliveries. The Government has, however, granted a three-month grace period for agencies to comply with the procedures, and imports are now proceeding regularly.

45. As at 31 December, 69 United Nations visa requests (either new visas or renewals) remained pending, 44 of which were within the 15 working day limit and 25 of which had exceeded the limit. In December, 34 visas were approved. In 2015, a total of 44 visas were rejected, exclusive of the four United Nations staff members who were declared personae non gratae in February. This compares with 28 visa rejections in all of 2014.

46. A total of 16 international non-governmental organizations are authorized to operate in the Syrian Arab Republic. International non-governmental organizations continued to face a series of administrative hurdles and restrictions that undermined their ability to operate. They remain restricted in their ability to partner with national humanitarian organizations, open sub-offices, conduct missions, join inter-agency convoys and undertake independent needs assessments. Three visas for staff of international non-governmental organizations remained pending as at 31 December, with 13 applications having been approved in December.

47. The number of national non-governmental organizations authorized to partner with United Nations organizations increased from 138 (operating through 221 branches) to 139 (operating through 223 branches) in December. One national non-governmental organization was added to the list in Rif Dimashq and one new branch was authorized for a non-governmental organization already on the approved list. Authorized national non-governmental organizations continue to operate under complex procedures in partnering with United Nations agencies.

Besieged areas

48. Of the 4.5 million people living in hard-to-reach areas in the Syrian Arab Republic, some 393,700 remained besieged. This includes approximately 200,000 people in Dayr al-Zawr city who are besieged by ISIL; some 181,200 people who are besieged by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic in various locations in eastern Ghutah and in Darayya and Zabadani, in Rif Dimashq; and some 12,500 people who are besieged by non-State armed opposition groups and the Nusrah Front in Fu'ah and Kafraya in Idlib governorate. Humanitarian access to people in besieged locations saw no improvement in 2015, with less than 1 per cent of people receiving food or non-food items per month, and around 3 per cent health assistance.

49. The parties to the conflict continued to entirely or heavily restrict access to besieged areas during the reporting period. In December, a total of 2,661 children in besieged locations were reached with textbooks and school support. No other assistance reached the besieged areas in December. The flow of commercial supplies through official routes remained largely blocked, leading to high prices for commodities reaching besieged areas through unofficial and irregular supply lines. Freedom of movement remained heavily restricted, although certain groups, such as students and members of reconciliation councils, were occasionally allowed to leave from and return to some besieged areas.

50. In eastern Ghutah, Rif Dimashq, some 176,500 people are besieged in the following locations: Duma, Harasta, Arbin, Zamalka, Ain Tarma, Hammura, Jisrein, Kafr Batna, Saqba and Zabadani. In December, UNICEF delivered textbooks and school supplies to 2,300 children in Harasta.

51. In Zabadani, in Rif Dimashq, prior to the recent evacuation, an estimated 700 people remained besieged by Government forces. On 28 December, the evacuation of wounded and accompanying family members from Zabadani and Madaya took place under the Four Towns agreement. In December, UNICEF delivered textbooks and school supplies to 340 children in Zabadani.

52. In Darayya, in Rif Dimashq, about 4,000 people remain besieged by Government forces. No assistance reached the area in December. People in Darayya have not been assisted by the United Nations since 2012.

53. In Fu'ah and Kafraya, in Idlib governorate, some 12,500 people remain besieged by non-State armed opposition groups and the Nusrah Front. No assistance reached the area in December. The evacuation of wounded and accompanying family members took place on 28 December under the Four Towns agreement. As at 13 January, a joint United Nations, ICRC and Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy had delivered humanitarian and life-saving assistance for 40,000 people in need in Madaya and 20,000 people in need in Fu'ah and Kafraya.

54. In the Government-controlled western neighbourhoods of Dayr al-Zawr city, some 200,000 people are besieged by ISIL. FAO and partners provided treatments for the livestock of 1,600 people in addition to wheat seeds for 500 people. With the approvals secured, plans remain for an emergency inter-agency United Nations airlift to deliver life-saving humanitarian assistance to the area but, to date, clashes in the vicinity of the military airport have prevented the operation from proceeding.

Free passage of medical supplies, personnel and equipment

55. In December, WHO and its implementing partners delivered medicines and medical supplies for over 346,000 treatments through cross-line operations in Aleppo and Homs governorates. The restricted access caused by the constraints imposed by the parties to the conflict and the worsening security environment constitutes one of the main hindrances to WHO operations. This affects the patients, the most vulnerable people, as well as the population's morbidity and mortality. Prevention of the delivery of essential medical supplies and equipment, in particular to hard-to-reach areas, besieged areas and areas controlled by non-State armed opposition groups, continues to lead to loss of life and lack of access to life-saving medical assistance. Five WHO requests to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to send medicines and medical supplies for 12 locations in five governorates remain pending, including requests to reach Sheikh Miskine in Dar'a, Shadade in Hasakah and Duma and Harasta in Rif Dimashq.

56. UNICEF delivered health and midwifery kits for over 200,000 people in primary health-care centres, hospitals and mobile clinics in northern governorates and emergency health kits for 40,000 health consultations in southern governorates. Water treatment supplies to treat water for a catchment population of 400,000 people were distributed, including for 70,000 people in hard-to-reach areas.

57. In December, WHO, UNICEF and partners reached over 860,000 children with polio vaccines. The vaccinations were given in Kobane for the first time, benefiting

17,800 children, and in Raqqah, Dayr al-Zawr, Hasakah, eastern Aleppo, eastern Hama and eastern Homs. The subnational vaccination campaign conducted in November 2015, which targeted hard-to-reach areas, reached 208,334 children (35 per cent of the 597,000 children targeted). The vaccination teams were not able to access Idlib, Ar-Raqqa and Dayr al-Zawr governorates; Palmyra, Ghantou and Teir Maala, in Homs; and eastern Ghouta, Madaya and Zabadani, in Rif Dimashq. In Raqqah, only Tal Abyad was reached, through Hasakah, and 6,554 children were vaccinated. Some areas in Yarmouk, Jobar, Darayya and Moadamiyet al-Sham were reached.

58. Humanitarian access for health non-governmental organizations providing medical services to ISIL-controlled areas continues to be extremely limited.

Safety and security of staff and premises

59. On 13 December, mortar attacks in Damascus city caused serious damage to the apartment of one UNHCR staff member. The staff member was not injured.

60. A total of 34 United Nations staff members, 31 of whom are UNRWA area staff, 1 from the United Nations Development Programme, 1 from UNICEF and 1 from UNHCR/United Nations Office for Project Services, continue to be detained or missing. Five UNRWA staff members were released in 2015. The total number of humanitarian workers killed in the conflict since March 2011 is 81. This includes 17 staff members of the United Nations, 48 staff members and volunteers of the Syrian Arab Red Cross, 8 volunteers and staff members of the Palestinian Red Crescent Society and 8 staff members of international non-governmental organizations. Of the 81, 15 have been killed since 1 January 2015.

III. Observations

61. The total disregard by the parties for human life and dignity remained a defining feature of the Syrian conflict in 2015. Throughout the year, the Syrian Arab Republic sank deeper into the conflict, with a devastating impact on the lives and livelihoods of ordinary Syrians. We saw parents taking impossible decisions for their families in search of a safer and better future and watched as many of them embarked on dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean which, for many, became their last. We witnessed harrowing scenes of severely malnourished people in Madaya. The use of starvation as a method of war has reached shocking depths of inhumanity and has become routine and systematic in the Syrian Arab Republic. I again remind all the parties to the conflict that attacks on civilians, the use of explosive weapons in civilian areas and other atrocious acts prohibited under international humanitarian law must stop. The deliberate targeting of civilians and the use of starvation as a weapon of war are war crimes, and those responsible must be held accountable. I am also deeply concerned about the alleged incidents of civilians being killed or injured in recent air strikes and again remind all forces of their responsibility to protect civilians in accordance with key norms and principles, such as proportionality, distinction and precautions, that are enshrined in international humanitarian law. I repeat my call for the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic to be referred to the International Criminal Court.

62. I remain extremely concerned about the increasing humanitarian needs in the Syrian Arab Republic. In 2015, another 1.3 million people joined the 12.2 million people already in need of assistance. The number of children in need went up by

18 per cent, from 5.1 million to 6 million. The number of internally displaced people reached 6.5 million and, by the end of 2015, over 4.6 million people had been registered as refugees. United Nations statistics show that since 2011, an average of 50 Syrian families have been displaced every hour of every day. The impact of the conflict on Syrian children and young people is also very worrisome. Children continue to be killed, maimed and recruited by parties to the conflict. There are 7.5 million children in the Syrian Arab Republic who are growing up knowing nothing but conflict, and over two million of them are out of school. This will have profound implications for years to come if it is not urgently addressed.

63. All parties to the conflict continued to deny access to humanitarian assistance throughout 2015, notwithstanding their obligations under international humanitarian law. In particular, I am deeply concerned about the horrific conditions facing the nearly 400,000 people who remain besieged across the country. The quantity of assistance reaching the besieged areas is pitiful, and in 2015, access to those areas shrank even further. The parties to the conflict need to lift the sieges and allow sustained and unimpeded access to the 4.5 million people living in areas classified as hard-to-reach. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has the primary responsibility to protect its civilian population.

64. The many challenges notwithstanding, the United Nations and its partners managed to reach millions of people in need in 2015. Six million people were reached monthly, on average, with food assistance, over 8.1 million people were provided with adequate drinking water, over 4.8 million people received non-food items, and 1.5 million people were reached with education interventions. However, much more is needed. Insecurity, fighting and deliberate operational obstructions continue to constrain the delivery of assistance, and surgical items are still being removed from convoys. The funding gap also widened. I call upon all donors to contribute generously at the upcoming "Supporting Syria and the Region: London 2016" pledging conference, which will be held on 4 February. The United Nations and its partners can do their job only when adequate funding is available.

65. I am encouraged by recent developments on the political front and, in particular, by the adoption, on 18 December 2015, of Security Council resolution 2254 (2015), which sets out a political path and timeline for ending the Syrian conflict. In the resolution, the Council reiterated its request that the parties abide by their obligations and requested the members of the International Syria Support Group to use their influence with the parties to that end. I expect the States members of the International Syria Support Group to follow through on those commitments and push for safe, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access throughout the Syrian Arab Republic, in particular to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, for the release of arbitrarily detained persons, and for the immediate cessation of any attacks against civilians and civilian objects and indiscriminate use of weapons. This is a fundamental test of the credibility of the renewed political process, and I expect this Council and the States members of the International Syria Support Group to actively support the more detailed confidence-building measures that I will propose later in January. It is imperative for all parties to exert every possible effort to support the United Nations in launching the negotiations. Only a genuine Syrian-led political settlement based on Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué can stop this tragedy and bring peace to the Syrian Arab Republic.